

Appropriations Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly

Hearing on the Governor's Budget Proposal for Community Colleges 2/28/11

Honorable Legislators,

My name is Donna Grant. I am a lifelong resident of the town of Pomfret; a native of Northeastern Connecticut; the Quiet Corner. I am the Executive Director of the Thompson Ecumenical Empowerment Group, or TEEG; a regional Community Service agency serving low income families and seniors. I am one of five children raised in a hardworking blue collar family where I was taught the value of a solid work ethic, but not the value of a college education. However, despite our family's philosophy and against all odds, **I am, thankfully, a graduate of the Community College System.**

After 18 years of taking a class here, a lab there, I was able to finally graduate from Quinebaug Valley Community College. In both my childhood and marital home, college was not considered necessary for gainful employment. And it wasn't. I always worked... two and three jobs at entry level pay. It wasn't until after a divorce that I saw the potential that I was not capitalizing on; A QVCC professor talked to me about "working smarter, not harder" and encouraged me to finish my degree.

With my associates in hand, I was immediately promoted from my entry level position of Youth Worker to the supervisory position of Youth Director. This came with a raise and the addition of health benefits which allowed me, for the first time in my adult life to work one job. I was inspired. I quickly learned about the Charter Oak "Women in Transition" program and applied. The completion of my bachelor's degree came at an opportune time. There was a vacancy at the agency, and I was offered the position of Executive Director, the position I still hold today. What's important to understand is that I was the same person, in the same agency, doing much of the same work...but **the degree allowed me to increase my income three-fold.** I went from earning just barely over minimum wage to a salary significant enough to allow me to meet my families' financial needs with one paycheck...and do a much better job of meeting the rest of their needs because I was no longer juggling three kids and three jobs.

I can tell you with great surety; this would not have happened for me without community college.

Today, I serve as the Chairperson for the Scholarship Committee of the QVCC Foundation. Each year I read hundreds of applications, (over 60% of the student body at QVCC qualifies for financial aid) telling the story of Quiet Corner residents, like myself. Students of all ages and from many walks of life working to overcome various forms of personal adversity in an effort to improve their lives, the lives of those around them, and ultimately the communities they live in. Their desire for self-improvement is remarkable; however their ability to attain it is completely dependent on an **opportunity to secure an affordable education in the community where they live and work.**

One of the most important aspects for you to understand about Community College is the immediate improvement to the community with each graduate; 75% of Community College graduates stay in their community. They return the investment in themselves to the communities they live in.

Governor Malloy has spoken often about not shredding the safety net for our state's most vulnerable residents. He has also warned that we need to be more cost effective and efficient in our program delivery. This will require a level of community investment that comes from those who feel a sense of ownership in their community. Community College graduates are often these individuals. I believe that I am an example of the home grown leadership that I am talking about. I was born in NE CT. I was raised here, educated here and I work here. I know my community. I know where there are resources to be leveraged and partnerships that can be made to advance the well-being of those who need a hand. **I am connected to my community in a way that allows me to hold those we serve accountable**, something someone less connected to this community simply cannot do.

One final comment that I would like to leave you with in these very trying economic times is the concept of "Bang for the Buck". We are facing a time in our history when conservation of resources isn't just the right thing to do; it's the only thing to do. There is no new money and there is less "old money" than there used to be. **We have to make the best possible decisions about every dollar we spend.** As a parent, I have had to do this for some time. That is why, when my son was looking at colleges, I strongly recommended he complete his first two years at QVCC. He had wanted to attend a small private college in VT. When we did the math, a year at Marlboro would cost \$42,000, while a year at QVCC would cost \$2,985. We agreed he would complete an Associates and then transfer.

I am pleased to say that upon the completion of his Associates Degree, he applied and was accepted to Marlboro College. They allowed all 62 credits to transfer into his new education degree. After completing the requirements for a four year degree in four years, he will graduate in May, with honors, and only \$18,000 in debt to re-pay. With the financial aid and scholarships he was awarded, his obligation for 4 years at Marlboro would have been over \$56,000. If you were able to ask him today, he would tell you that his **QVCC experience offered him an exceptional education in liberal arts, and a priceless lesson in debt management.**

When we are faced with the very difficult decisions that are at hand, we must consider the value of each expenditure we make. We must ask the question **"Is this simply an expense, or is it an investment?"** I urge you to consider the gains made by investing in our Community College system...investments that will pay direct dividends by improving the lives of individual residents of Connecticut; the families they live with, the communities they reside in and to our state as a whole. Maintaining funding for Connecticut's Community Colleges passes the **"Bang for the Buck"** test that all state expenditures should be put to.

Thank You

Donna Grant

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